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New Style, Old Content

Gorbachev's Proposals Viewed as Seeking To Revive Strains Between U.S., Allies

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Washington Post Foreign Service

PARIS, Oct. 3—"Today the general secretary said we are ready to put aside traditional methods, to leave the traditional approach of the past," Soviet arms negotiator Yuli Kvitsinsky told reporters shortly after Mikhail Gorbachev had called for the first time for direct talks with Britain and France on nuclear weapons.

Startling as it seemed coming from a Soviet spokesman, this trumpeting of change was the keynote of an extraordinary exercise in public diplomacy by Gorbachev in Paris today. The change in tone overshadowed for many listeners the substance of his proposals, an

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effect that may not be entirely accidental.

Stripped of much of their language of flexibility and examined solely in numerical terms, Gorbachev's proposals on reducing nuclear weapons in Europe are strikingly similar to the numerical limits sought by his predecessors.

Nevertheless, with a few bold strokes the Soviet government appeared to have ended its longstanding policy of conducting arms control in a manner closely held even from Soviet negotiators. Gorbachev, referring to Shakespeare and sounding a plea for "security in Europe," introduced his proposals in a speech before members of the French parliament. Kvitsinsky, the Soviet negotiator who made head-

lines throughout the West two years ago when his walk-in-the-woods talks with U.S. arms specialist Paul Nitze were publicized, jetted in from Geneva to field press questions about them.

But the object of these gestures was strikingly familiar to western analysts of Soviet arms control diplomacy. Presented here, on Western Europe's center stage, the proposal was designed to strike at the strains between Western European countries and the United States in arms control.

For many analysts, Gorbachev's emphasis on change appeared to be calculated to reawaken the strong antinuclear sentiment that coursed through Western Europe in the early 1980s but has since grown dormant.

The Soviet leader clearly was aiming at public opinion in the Netherlands and West Germany, which bear the burden of persuading public opinion that deployment of U.S. medium-range missiles in those countries—as a counter to Soviet SS20 missiles already deployed—is a wise policy.

Gorbachev also appeared to be adopting a page from Ronald Reagan's domestic policy book by appealing to public opinion over the heads of the British and French governments, which are almost certain to reject his proposal for direct talks on nuclear weapons.

At its core, the proposal represents a few novel ribbons wrapped around a repackaging of familiar Soviet arms positions presented during arms control talks or public statements over the past few months.

Gorbachev drew no attention to one of the major implied changes that his proposal on medium-range missiles does represent, however.

By proposing in effect that U.S. Pershing II and cruise missiles deployed in Europe be counted against

the total of U.S. strategic arms that can hit Soviet territory, the Russians now appear to be saying that the United States can have the missiles in Europe, but at a price.

That price presumably would be sacrificing intercontinental ballistic missiles stationed in the United States in bringing U.S. totals down by 50 percent.

Previously the Soviet Union has insisted that no new U.S. nuclear missiles should be stationed in Western Europe. In 1983, then Soviet leader Yuri Andropov offered to reduce the total of SS20 missiles to 162, the combined total of French and British nuclear missiles, in return for the United States deploying no medium-range missiles on this continent. That offer was rejected by the United States.

Today, Kvitsinsky offered a numerical rundown of nuclear forces in Europe that suggested the combined total of French and British missiles continues to be the Kremlin's basic yardstick for the number of SS20s it must have in Europe no matter what the U.S.-Soviet strategic levels become.

His arithmetic showed that the Soviets currently count British and French forces at a total of 178 missiles, with 258 warheads.

Today's proposals suggest that the Soviets would want to keep 243 SS20s, with a total of 729 warheads, to counter the French and British forces. The Soviet edge in warheads implies a willingness to tolerate some modernization and increase of the European forces, or perhaps leaves the Russians some room to maneuver in accepting the counting of some U.S. missiles in Europe in the final negotiations.

In singling out the SS20 for extended comment and an unusual public accounting here today, Gorbachev was openly responding to public concern on this continent over missiles that can only be used in or against European nations and not against the United States.

He appeared thus to be trying to give new life to militant groups in West Germany, Britain and the Netherlands that have protested against the deployment of Pershing II and cruise missiles in those nations. The three, along with Italy and Belgium, agreed in 1979 to accept up to 572 American medium-range missiles to counter the Soviet SS20 deployments that began in the mid-1970s.

The SS20, a much more accurate missile than the SS4s and SS5s it replaced, carries three warheads.

By June 1984, the Soviets were said by western intelligence services to have deployed a total of 378 SS20s, 243 in Europe and the rest in Asia. U.S. officials said last month that the Russians have now deployed a total of 441 SS20s.

The significance of the Soviet insistence that it has returned to the level of 243 in Europe lies in a decision that is to be made on Nov. 1 by the Netherlands, where the government has said that only if the Soviets return to the total of SS20s deployed in June 1984, will it refuse the 48 cruise missiles it is scheduled to take.

Dutch spokesmen today minimized the importance of Gorbachev's claimed reductions, asserting that their government would focus on the 1984 global deployment figure of 378 in making its decision.

In light of the NATO figures, "there is a real possibility" that the Netherlands will agree to the cruise deployments, according to a spokesman at the Dutch Embassy in Paris, despite Dutch public opinion polls showing a slight majority against the cruise missiles.

In essence, the new Soviet style appears to be to soften its approach to Western Europe and to pose as offering constructive alternatives to the U.S.-led approach to arms control rather than forcing confrontation, as it did during the medium-range negotiations two years ago.